

DANCING & SOCIETY

By Calvin Campbell

In 2003, Tony Oxendine started a slick four color magazine named Square Dancing Today. I was asked to write a monthly column titled "Dance." Tony gave a free hand to cover any topic I felt was important. The magazine was a quality product, but was published for less than a year as square dancers did not support it with subscriptions.

Dancing and Society

If we were living 300 years ago, or even 50 years ago, dancing would, most likely, have been a very important part of our social life. Of course, many of you will argue that it is an important part of your social life now and would be correct. For many hundreds of years, dancing was an important part of the social life of most of the population of the western world.

Most of us are aware of the role of dancing in primitive cultures. However, many people are not aware of just how large a role dancing played in the ruling cultures of Europe, The British Isles, and the Americas. To learn the role dancing played, all you have to do is to read historical novels of the times. They are filled with descriptions of balls and dances and the intrigue and romances that swirled around them. Dances and balls were where people met, visited, courted and schemed. It was the hub activity of many communities. It didn't matter if you were a miner, a farmer, a noble or a king. There was always someplace where you could dance. For many, it only took a fiddle or a piano and a place with a little space.

In some parts of society, your social status was affected by how well you could do a hornpipe or a jig or a polka or a waltz. Children learned the steps of their ethnic dances very early. They practiced these dances with their playmates. They competed to see who

could do them the best. As they grew, their presence on the dance floor signaled their entry into adulthood. Even today, we still have debutante balls for young women entering society.

In the wealthier families, it was very common for the children to be given private lessons by a hired dance master. In poorer families, older generations taught the younger generations the important dances. Dancing was an essential part of your "upbringing"- A vital ingredient for the training of any child.

Once you reached adulthood, the pursuit of the opposite sex was usually enhanced if you could dance well. For many years, dancing was one of the few convenient and socially acceptable places for men and women to meet new people. Many of the dance routines resulted in the exchange of partners as the dance progressed. It was very common for partners to exchange coy glances and even casual conversation with each other as they danced. These short conversations often broke-the-ice and introduced men and women to each other. Acceptance or rejection was accomplished with as little as a nod or smile or, in some cases, perhaps a cold stare of lack of interest.

Dances were often the places where mothers brokered marriages for their daughters or arranged strategic introductions for their sons. Whom you danced with was as important as what you danced. Whole parties were planned around the opening musical number and who danced together in the Grand March or opening waltz. Often, entire dance program partners were "arranged" before the first dance of the evening began.

Dances were also the place where people came to see and to be seen. If you had political ambitions, you probably

had a plan for your preferred choice for a partner for each dance during the evening. It wasn't always the pretty young girls or handsome men. It was important to be seen dancing with the host or hostess, and it certainly didn't hurt your status, as an ambitious man, to escort the wife of a judge or mayor to the floor for a stately minuet. Her comments to her husband, about your dancing and conversation skills, were as important as the presentation of an introductory letter.

Through the 1700s, 1800s and even into the middle 1900s, dances remained a significant venue for political and business activities. They provided a place to establish contacts, much in the same way cocktail parties are used today. What transpired on the sidelines was as important as what occurred on the dance floor. In many ways it was an ideal place to network, more-so than we have today. Certainly, it was probably a lot more fun. Specific dances often identified the time and the culture. Think about the '20s without the Charleston or the Lindy Hop. Imagine a World War II canteen without the image of young men and young women doing the Swing. Picture an Israeli wedding without the Hora. It's hard to paint a mental image of any time period or event without distinctive music and dances to go along with the costumes and the times.

Now, where does square dancing fit into all of this? Following World War II, there were thousands and thousands of military people returning from all over the world. Wives had followed husbands to distant training posts and workers had moved all over the country to fill wartime jobs. Many of these people came from regions of the country where their ancestors had never ventured more than a dozen miles away from home for perhaps generations.

Many were displaced by war and had no desire to go back to their former homes nor resume their former lives. They were

looking for new places to live and work, and they wanted new friends. Square Dancing provided one of many social platforms where people could meet and mingle. However, square dancing held several advantages over some of the other recreations.

- Strangers were able to meet and make friends in an environment where there was little or no need for formal introductions.
- It was a melting pot built around the idea of dancing with a group of people.
- It broke down many social barriers.
- You can't really hold hands in a circle or swing a stranger and remain strangers very long.
- You might easily be dancing in a square with people from eight different parts of the country with only one thing in common – having fun at the dance.
- The fascination and joy with a very simple and fun form of dancing.
- After the tip, your square or circle of dancers tend to visit with each other.
- Social inhibitions that often accompanied meeting strangers were erased in just a few minutes.
- Suddenly everyone had something in common.

It is little wonder that square dancing became so popular so quickly. It was the ideal medium for a country filled with people that needed to form friends and liaisons quickly. It was the ideal healing agent to dim the memories of war. Once it started gaining popularity, the hobby quickly carried over to the younger generations, just reaching adulthood. It became, "The thing to do." Square dancing was the perfect dance at the ideal time. Why? Because no prior dance experience was necessary. It was easy to do. Square dancing did not require the

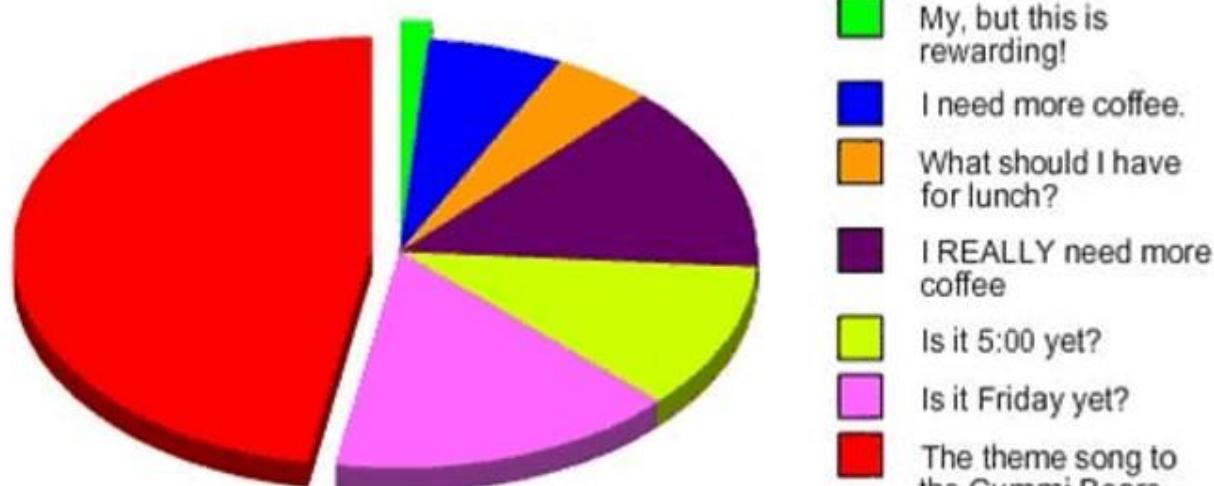
expertise of a dance master, or study under an elder. All you had to be able to do was to walk, with reasonable skill, and be able to listen to and follow simple directions given by a caller. With those simple skills, you could dance the night away.

It took very little time to learn. Most of the early square dance clubs were formed around a core of basics that numbered no more than 16. You could master these basics with just a few lessons. Once you were a square dancer, it was easy to attract others to this great

recreation because the learning cycle was so short

Square dancing probably introduced more people to dancing, in the United States, in the 20th century, than any other dance form that achieved popularity during those years. When historians look back on the 20th century, 100 years from now, I hope they recognize the important role square dancing played, for many years, in the evolution of a different way of life after World War II. I hope some square dancers are still around to remind them.

What is Running Through My Head At Work



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when you were born to
STAND OUT!**

--Dr. Seuss